

Ares Rift

by kwipinky

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Summary: Family and friends join together for eulogies for Xena and Gabrielle

Ares Rift

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Disclaimer: Xena Warrior Princess and that world of hers, including Gabrielle and all of the others, do not belong to me. They are RENPIC's. I guess, though I don't really know. I won't make any dollars, dinars, drachmas, lira, (or insert your monetary unit) on this story. I didn't write this for money. I am just telling a story that was stuck in my head and demanded to be freed. So, I hope you enjoy it. Let me know: kwip75@aol.com

Sex: Nope

Violence: Just like any episode. Still PG anyway.

Spoilers: Yep, lots of them.

Thanks: To my beta reader Kim, thank you for your efforts and time. I hope to return the favor someday. To Kam thanks for the kind and gentle words, and for the still kind but harder words I owe you a huge thank you. So, I hope you enjoy the story.

Ares Rift

By

Kwipinky

Six men attacked, swords flew. The chakram sang a song of darkness: night, night boys. The first man landed on the ground and the second

followed close behind. The battle was delicious. Xena's war cry strained the eardrums of the third attacker, and with a flying kick he landed in the opposite direction. Gabrielle drew her sais; she came face to face with the fourth man and Xena's chakram flew and blocked the man's blow before Gabrielle could react. With Xena's sweeping leg he slammed to the ground unconscious. Simultaneous kicks and punches sent the fifth and sixth bandits to land beside the first and second. Gabrielle stormed off to fill their waterskins. A woman followed Gabrielle with her eyes; the time had come for the Warrior Princess to step aside. Xena must die and Gabrielle's death would be a bonus. Ares needed an heir.

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The chakram encircled the sword in its scabbard. The sword leaned against an Amazon staff propped against the warrior saddle straddling a bench. Beneath and completely surrounding the items were various sprays of flowers.

Quiet murmurs wafted around the tavern. Voices that laughed, cried and sighed came in crescendos. Cyrene carried a tray of wine filled mugs. She worked the room quickly and carefully; methodically flitting from table to table, she gathered and deposited, but didn't say much. Eyes followed her every move. She wore a black dress with black lace edging down the neckline, around her waist and finally around the hem just above her ankles. She had a garter wrapped around her bicep that matched the black lace. She was barefooted. Her salt and pepper hair was pulled sternly back with a black-laced scarf. She wore dark lipstick and her eyes were swollen and red. Her mind rushed and her thoughts carefully filled with serving the patrons. She said, "Would you like a refill, wine? Meade? Noâ€¦.thanks, I'll get it, thank you, I'm fineâ€¦." Clearly, she was not fine.

She stopped at a table where Joxer (the Mighty) had his head down. His forehead touched the wooden surface. Around his head were eight empty mugs. Cyrene again tried to remove them, but Joxer placed his hand over Cyrene's.

"Leave them," he slurred. "I want to record how many mugs it took to render me into oblivion." Cyrene put her arm across his shoulders.

"Joxer?"

"Yes?"

"Joxer dear, you need to pull yourself together." Cyrene said gently.

He raised his head and peered across the room. He yawned open mouthed and began to cry loudly. "Why?" He stood. "Do you people know what they mean to me?" He bellowed and slammed his fist into the tabletop. He sat down hard, and slowly banged his forehead onto the wood of his table. "Why? Whyâ€¦?"

Cyrene looked frantically at the faces staring back at her. Autolycus got up, walked over and placed his arm around her shoulders.

"I'll take care of him," Autolycus whispered to Cyrene. She half smiled and quickly rushed out the side door of the tavern. Autolycus walked over to Joxer's table and stooped down near his head.

"Hey Joxer."

"Huh," Joxer raised his head and nearly hit Autolycus' nose with his own.

"You think you could share some of your wine?"

"No. I have to have it all. Every last drop. All of it!"

"Okay, okay. Take it easy, fella." Autolycus sat down right beside Joxer.

"I ain't that kind of a man. Auto." Joxer said as he pushed Autolycus away.

"I know, Joxer. I just want to talk."

"Talk? Huh, well. Talk then." Joxer's red eyes watered and tears spilled over the corners. Autolycus smiled sadly.

Ephiny walked over to the side door and exited into a narrow alley. She didn't see Cyrene so she walked through the alley, which opened into the stable courtyard. Hercules and Iolaus were standing near the pasture fence. Ephiny looked around for Cyrene and saw her at the end of the stables. She wanted to make sure she was okay, but as she walked toward Cyrene, Hercules stepped toward her and reached for her arm.

"Let her go," Hercules said. Ephiny shot him a stern look and pushed past him. He shook his head and walked back to where Iolaus was standing. They both entered the barn to check the horses.

Cyrene leaned against the back of the building. As sobs racked her body, she was unaware of the Amazon regent's presence. Ephiny touched Cyrene's arm, and she turned to look at her.

"I am so sorry. Iâm| umâ€| amâ€|."

"Ephiny?" Cyrene said.

"Yes."

"I've heard so much about you. Gabriâ€|." Cyrene's throat constricted.

"Yes, I've heard a great deal about you as well." Ephiny smiled. "I could tell you were Xena's mother right away."

"Oh." Cyrene whispered. "Thanks."

"It's clear that Xena's beauty is inherited." Disgusted with her idle chatter Ephiny continued. "I love Xena very much. Many times she helped the Amazon nation to survive. She stopped the war between the centaurs and our nation. I met my husband, Phantes as a result of that peace. She even delivered my son Xenon."

"My. She is quite a daughter." Cyrene grinned.

"I'm representing my tribe. We owe Xena and Gabrielle so much. We are all in mourning." Ephiny shifted her feet. She wore a leather tunic and pleated Amazon skirt. An Artemis portrait and Amazon battlefield were illustrated on the suede material. Her boots were suede as well, and they had fraying leather fringes along the stitched sides and tops. Her arms bore leather-mourning straps, one each for her dearest friends. "We will miss them."

Cyrene looked at the regent and her heart went out to her. Ephiny's words provided some comfort, but the loss all those years of Xena's life saddened her deeply. They both knew Xena, but neither knew the Xena that the other knew. A sound from the stable drew their attention. Iolaus pushed open the door and stopped mid-stride.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to interrupt," he said looking back and forth at each woman.

Cyrene looked at him and Ephiny and said, "I need to get back to my customers."

Iolaus knew the people inside the tavern are more than just customers. He stepped aside as Ephiny and Cyrene passed him. He was amazed at how much Xena favored her mother. He wondered if Gabrielle and her mother shared the same resemblance. He guessed he would know soon enough, they were due any moment. He went back into the barn to find a clean place to lie down.

The noise from the wagon's rattling wheels jarred Iolaus awake. He jumped to his feet and walked over to the doors. Outside he saw Gabrielle's mother Hecuba, her father Herodotus, and her dark haired sister Lila. They sat unmoving in the wagon and Iolaus walked to where Hecuba was sitting. She looked down at him and then at her husband. Iolaus offered his hand and she slowly and deliberately reached out. Herodotus jumped out of the wagon and pushed his way in front of Iolaus.

"I'll help her," he snapped through clenched teeth. Iolaus stepped back his stunned expression attracting Lila's attention. She very slightly motioned for Iolaus to come closer to her. He walked past the angry man and positioned himself at the rear of the wagon. He lowered the gate and helped Lila down. Herodotus looked in his direction. He was about to say something when Hecuba squeezed his hand. Herodotus looked at her and she shook her head. He grunted as he helped his wife from the wagon. She smoothed her dark dress.

Hecuba's dress was dark brown and had small almost unnoticeable flowers woven into the fabric. She wore dark sandals with leather lacings. She carried a small leather purse and dark ladies gloves. Her gray hair pulled loosely back with elastic, had a flower pinned on the left side of her head. Emerald green eyes were swollen and pink and her cheeks were flushed. She held a locket in her awkwardly bent left hand and rubbed its gold face to ease the arthritic pain in her fingers, and she clutched a damp kerchief in her right hand. She stepped away from her husband and smoothed her clothing. He scratched his head behind his left ear.

Herodotus's once dark hair was almost completely gray, and much to

his dismay, the bald spot at his crown had spread. His face was like leather and was highlighted by milky green eyes wrinkled from working in the sun for many years. His mouth was tiny compared to the rest of his body. He walked as if he carried the weight of the world. Herodotus dark trousers had large pockets and down the length of the legs were stripes of dark cotton. His black leather boots were old but well cared for. He unloaded a small bag and lifted a bouquet of flowers gently from the wagon bed. He handed the flowers to Lila.

She took them with shaking hands. Her dress was light beige and had flower designs in the soft material. She also wore sandals, but they were a lighter color, and had flower designs in them too. Her creamy complexion was almost white causing her dark black hair to clash with her delicate features. Her lips were full and somewhat pouty. Like her sister's, Lila's eyes were green, but they did not have the same sparkle which Gabrielle sometimes envied. Lila and Hecuba's dresses both had the same flower designs. Simple daisies.

Iolaus decided to escort the family into the tavern. He did not cherish the idea of bringing Gabrielle's parents into the building of mourners, but he wanted them to feel as comfortable as they possibly could. Iolaus wondered why everyone ended up at the tavern. No one planned on the eulogy being there, but somehow it was where everyone ended up.

It had been two weeks since the personal items of Xena and Gabrielle's were brought from Demeter's temple. Two long and torturous weeks. Hercules had received the news about his friends the same day and time the messenger from Poteidaia brought the news of Gabrielle's parents planned arrival in Amphipolis. Her parents had wanted to meet Iolaus and Hercules. Apparently, Gabrielle had told them many tales about their legendary journeys.

"Iolaus?" Lila said.

"Yes. Lila, right?"

"Yes," Lila started to cry. "I always wanted to meet you. Just, not like this."

Herodotus hugged his daughter and glared at Iolaus. He searched for something to dislike but he did not find it. Hercules walked out of the tavern and saw Gabrielle's family. He walked over and extended his large arm.

"Hello, I'm here."

"Hercules!" Herodotus shouted. Everyone jumped to the sound of the outburst. Hecuba embraced her husband and reached for Hercules to join them. He hugged the family and his eyes suddenly filled with tears. Herodotus shook his head and regained his composure and pushed Hercules away from his family.

"I am Herodotus of Poteidaia. I take it you're the man responsible for Xena's change?" Herodotus looked at Hercules.

"Well, yes."

"Then, do I thank you for my daughter's fate?" Herodotus asked

angrily. Hercules looked at Iolaus and then at Lila, and Hecuba.

"Iâ€| Wellâ€|" Hercules stammers.

"Herodotus please," Hecuba pleaded with her husband. "It's not Hercules fault that Gabrielle travels with Xena."

"No it is not his fault she travels with Xena. It's his fault that Xena is alive to begin with. Right?"

Hercules looked at Herodotus and stilled himself. "Surely you don't wish Xena dead."

Herodotus turned his back. Quietly he said: "I don't know what I wish. Yes I do," He turned to face Hercules again. "I wish my daughter was here. NOW!" he cried. Hercules stepped to the side as Herodotus's wife and daughter took him inside.

Iolaus went to Hercules side and patted him on the shoulder. "It's okay Herc. He's in pain."

"I know. I know." They both entered the tavern.

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Cyrene cleared her throat and stood in front of the bar. There were several rows of chairs and each chair was full, but others stood around the room. Cyrene scanned the room and began to speak.

"Everyone, I have refreshments on the bar and tables around the tavern. There's wine, cider and food. Please feel free to eat and drink. I think we should begin. I'm Cyrene, Xena's mother. I guess most of you know me. What I don't know is where to start. Xena had many lives and each of us saw only a part. She started her life here as a beautiful little, black haired girl. She had the fattest cheeks and rosiest disposition. She was no trouble at all to care for.

"Once when she was four seasons old, she decided to train a goat. She chose the meanness and orneriest one we had. A very fierce nanny goat. Xena decided that it would be a horse. Xena got Lyceus to help her capture the goat, and they brought it to the courtyard. Xena climbed on the little animal's back and it immediately took off. The goat starting ramming people, the fruit stand, the fish stand, horses, wagons, anything in its angry pathway. Xena could be heard quietly at first 'Yiyiyiyiyiyiyi...yikes! LYâ€|CEâ€|US!' she called out as the goat ran for all it was worth. 'Yiyiyiyiyiyiyiâ€|yippy!' It ran for two candle marks and Xena was in every position imaginable. Butâ€| she never fell off. When the goat had had enough, and could run no more, Xena raised her leg over to her right side and plopped to the ground. Just like she dismounts from Argo now." Cyrene smiled. The people in the room smiled with her. Cyrene looked at the people in the tavern and found comfort in knowing Xena had many friends. She took another drink of her wine.

"Xena was tall for her age, she towered above her peers. As she grew, she seemed a bit awkward, and unbelievably, an uncoordinated

teenager, which just challenged Xena all the more. She and Lyceus used to spar with each other behind our home. They broke many reeds and sticks practicing the art of swordplay. Lyceus always managed to break Xena's sword, but Xena refused defeat, any kind of defeat. So, one day she fashioned an unbeatable sword. He grew increasingly angry at her ability to stop his best attempts. Some time later, as she was doing the dishes, Lyceus came into the room, mad as a harpie with a toothache. He had found out Xena's little secret. She had inserted a long thin strip of metal that the smith gave her, into the center of her sword. Xena laughed until she was in tears and her nose was running. She was determined to succeed in all aspects of her life. She focused on a having happy life, and was living it too, untilâ€¦.Cortese."

Cyrene kept wiping her hands on her apron. "He was a warlord. A ruthless, evil man, who wanted all of Amphipolis' resources. Lyceus and Xena, barely out of their childhood, were determined to defeat that monster. Lyceus was to lead the frontal assault. Some villagers were to back him up and fortify the perimeter of the town. Xena led a small group to the rear of the town to allow a clear retreat. I remember it all too well, Xena and Lyceus' final planning session was right here at this bar. Unfortunately, Cortese had spies in town." Cyrene stopped for a minute. She rememberedâ€¦.

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"Lyceus we can reroute some of the men and cut off Cortese's drive." Xena said. "He has a weak front, and he'll bring his best men to block the rear. I've heard that is how he does his battles; he stops rear retreats. He depletes some of his line to do that, and we can use that against him Lyceus. We can build up our troops and catch him off guard."

"I know. But a frontal assault is the best way to engage his best troops," Lyceus argued. "I've sent Mathias, four of our best archers and ten of our warriors for hand to hand combat. They're focus is to take the left flank and then to guard the rear. We've got 'em Xena. The left flank has his catapult's and arrow supplies. It was a stroke of luck that Mathias heard Cortese's drunken men discussing his attack. His reducing his men on the left is a victory for us. Don't you see?"

"Lyceus, don't you think that Cortese might want us to think that he has a weakness? What if Mathias is wrong? He is my betrothed, and I do loveâ€¦.care for him, why should he be the one who attacks the left flank? Why can't we lead the rear troops togetherâ€¦?"

"I've considered it Xena!" Lyceus snapped. "I'm sorry. Xena, look, I don't mean to be soâ€¦so on edge. You're my sister, and Mathias assured me the men didn't know he was there. With our best archers we can get Cortese's armory. You guarding the rear assures our ability to flee if the battle is against us. Your job is very important."

"I know Lyceus," Xena sighed. "I've been demanding on you. If you're willing to trust Mathias' plan tomorrow morning, then, I'll do my best. And I'll trust your belief that Mathias' has the ability to protect the rear. I will trust him. For you." _

Cyrene looked around the room and took a drink of strong red wine.

She continued, "Xena always blamed herself that Lyceus died in that battle. His death became the catalyst to her change from beloved child to angry warlord. Myâ€|. "Cyrene began to sob. "My little oneâ€|. my only daughter. I just got her back." Hercules went to Cyrene's side. He placed his arm around her shoulder. "Please allow me to finishâ€|.

'The next morning, Cortese attacked. I was trying to keep the women and children together inside the cellar. I heard a loud confrontation and ran to the rear. Soldiers were coming in from the back and Xena was fighting several men at once. She turned and called out to Lyceus. I guess he heard her pleas because he ran to join her. They were making progress against the army when Mathais arrived. Lyceus was fighting three men and he bested two of them. Xena was knocked to the ground. I ran toward her and saw Lyceus go down hard. Mathais reached out to him and when Lyceus reached upâ€| when my son reached up, Mathias ran him through. Xena screamed louder than I've ever heard. My world slowed and I felt like I was walking through cold molasses. Xena ran to her brother and battled Mathias. She screamed a primal war cry, and I lost my innocent daughter at that moment. She killed Mathias and ran to Lyceus side. He smiled, as she fell to her knees, she looked at Lyceus. He reached out to Xena then."

'Xena, I'm sorry. You were rightâ€|.' Lyceus said clutching her hand.

'Stay with me Lyceus. I'll get the healer.'

'You were always smarter, strongerâ€|.' he said as he coughed up blood.

'Don't leave me Lyceus! Don't leave me! Don't leave me â€|! Pleeeeeeaaasssee! NO!' she cried over and over as she pounded the ground.

"When Lyceus died Xena destroyed Mathais' body. She turned into a primal being. I stood watching her, and hating what I saw. She turned and saw me. I saw her head drop. I blamed her. Iâ€| blamedâ€| her!" Cyrene screamed. "Why? Why did I do that?" Hercules hugged and helped her to sit down; He gave her her mug, lifted it to quivering lips and forced her to drink. After a moment she stood up and faced the room she continued, "I'm sorry. I'm trying to understand those hard times. I lost my son, and my daughter because of my own ignorance. Xena left after Lyceus' funeral. I was angry with her. I didn't even forgive her when she changed, when she came home after going through an awful trial of beatings by her own men, I shunned her."

Cyrene cried, and anguish still gripped her heart. She looked at Hecuba and said. "I owe a debt of gratitude to you. Your child gave me back mine back." Cyrene paused and took a long drink of her wine. She looked around the room and she looked at Lila. "I guess you wonder why Gabrielle left you for Xena." Lila smiles. "She never stopped loving you. You will always be her only sister but I think she saw something in Xena that cried out to her heart."

Cyrene stopped for a moment. She took a deep breath and addressed the people in the tavern. "Xena and Gabrielle are never going to die. They live in me and in all of you. I won't be sad because they're gone. I'll tend the flowers of their love in the garden of my memories. They'll grow stronger than ever. My love will grow everyday

because I know I'll see them again. I love you Gabrielle, I love you my little one." Cyrene held her head high and walked behind the bar.

For a few moments people talked quietly among themselves. Autolycus stood and walked to the front of the room. "Ahem. I am Autolycus, King of Thieves," he said and looked for reactions from the room.

"I've been to Thebes, glad to meet'cha your highness," said one of the intoxicants, as he nodded his head at the room.

Autolycus bristled at the laughter that erupted from his friends. "I am the King of THIEVES," he enunciated very clearly. He looked for more reactions. When there was none he continued. "I thought it would be appropriate to speak after Cyrene because, when she said Xena was alive in all of us I flashed back." He laughed. "Brother, she was in me big time!" A few gasps floated around the people and Autolycus appreciated the shock he caused.

"Let me explain. A few years back, I was minding my own business and I suddenly hear Xena's voice inside my head. She possessed me. A feat many women have tried, by the way. Heh heh. I thought that I'd had too much of the happy stuff, if you know what I mean. Heh heh. Ahem. Xena had gotten herself killed and Gabrielle was taking her body home." He stopped and wiped his eyes. "Dust, you know." He wiped his eyes again and held his head a couple of minutes. "Ahem. I was the one person Xena knew that could steal her body from her little friend. We eventually convinced Gabrielle that Xena was alive and that she needed her body. She'd taken a little vacation. Heh heh. Hmm. We had an intimate relationship. Xena was in here." Autolycus touched his head. "But really, she was in here." He placed his hand on his chest over his heart.

"That's where she is now. Xena is more than a friend. She saved me many times. Not from just assassins or jailors, but from myself. I wish she were with me again. I wish I could hear her voice, feel her boot on my head and that little pinch of hers. No, not the pinch. Xena, if ya can hear me. I love ya, babe. Auto's here if you need this body. Same rules though." He laughed and looked at Cyrene.

"You remind me so much of Xena. She thought of you often while she was inside me. I don't know if she knew it or not, but I could hear her thoughts. She was so concerned that you would be angry with her. She thought if she came back she would cause you more pain. She wrestled with the idea of staying dead and allowing you the peace of mind that she would finally be at rest. She wanted to see Lyceus and Solan, and be together with them again; she was very tired. But she knew that the world needed her. Gabrielle needed her."

Autolycus looked at Herodotus and Hecuba. "Gabrielle was so lost. Xena was gone and she was torn. The Amazon nation needed her as their queen. She could lead with peace and help the women have safer happier lives. But, she'd promised to take Xena's body home. Gabrielle believed in fulfilling her promises. Despite the loneliness and grief that she felt, perhaps because of it, Gabrielle did what she thought she had to do; she took on the evil that wanted her dead. She stood against an evil woman who wanted war and death. Your little child from Poteidaia was very determined in what she believed, and

very pissed-off at me when I tried to steal Xena's body. I don't know how you feel about Xena, and I believe you love your daughter." Autolycus smiled warmly. He closed his eyes and opened them. Tears streamed down his face. He let them flow. "They have something so special. Something I'd never felt before, (or since, he thought), I allowed Xena to speak to Gabrielle through me. There was such a rush of love that I nearly lost my breath. The feeling was better and stronger than the effects of any herb or ale. Pure love. Love, promised forever, with a simple kiss, a kiss of life, a kiss ensuring they would be together for eternity. After the kiss, Xena never had a doubt about returning.

"Wherever they are now, they're together. They have what they need to sustain. We should all be so lucky. I feel lucky to have known them, and lucky for the rush Xena shared with me. I am crushed because I miss them. Remembering those two and what they shared will have to be enough. So, friends and family: remember not the faults of Xena and Gabrielle, remember their goodness, remember their humanity, and forget the moments of anger, words of haste, tears of bitterness, forget the times of uncertainty and doubt. Remember the daughters, their laughter, their pranks and the love you share. Remember their first step, first words and the many times they made your hearts swell. Take delight in their life, celebrate it, and share it with those not so lucky to have known them. You owe them that much. We owe them that much." Autolycus stopped. He bowed his head slightly and the sobs racked his body. "Gods I miss them." He held his head up. "I love you Xena, and you too Gabrielle." Autolycus joined Joxer. Joxer put his arm across Autolycus' back and hugged him.

Hercules got up and patted Autolycus on the back also, and then he too, went to the front of the tavern. He wore a dark brown shirt and his customary leather braided pants tucked into his boots. A band of mourning was wrapped around his bicep. His golden hair was brilliant and his eyes highlighted his clean-shaven face. Wrinkles of sadness traced the outline of his jaw and he constantly twisted a piece of leather he held. He gripped by grief. He took a sip of wine to keep his throat from closing up. Tears added moisture to his eyes. He cleared his throat.

"I'm sure that Xena and Gabrielle could never be loved any deeper than they are loved by the people in this room. Xena knew what it was to take. She was the Destroyer of Nations. She instilled fear and hatred. Something happened to her; Xena learned what it was to give. She found her heart. She said I gave it to her, but I believe she had it all along. A warlord ravaged Xena's innocent and trusting soul. She was blinded then. Evil took her youth and twisted it into a sordid past. She would be the first to say she was absolutely responsible for her actions. She became the symbol of her destruction. She used monstrous tactics in her search for the youth she lost. The evil that consumed her created a ravenous hunger for power. Xena thought power would keep her from being victimized again. She was wrong. Xena had goodness in her. She found it in the life of an innocent babe. She defended that child and was nearly beaten to death by her own men. That was the beginning of her change, and she saw the death and violence she had caused. Xena wanted to change; she wanted to atone. She began to fight for the lives of others.

"She had almost given up when she met Gabrielle. Gabrielle had the light Xena needed to illuminate her darkest moments. Gabrielle's light led Xena through the muck and blood, and she finally rekindled

the flame of innocence that was stolen from Xena by pure evil. Ares. He went after her when she was young and hurting. He promised her the world and delivered death. Death of compassion, love and trust. But Xena had goodness in her all along the way. She just needed to find and focus on it," Hercules smiled sadly. "Xena has atoned. She paid her dues even with suffering and injuries. Gabrielle's light helped Xena see through the darkness of her soul, the darkness Ares loved to use to keep her in his fold. Gabrielle illustrates for the world the goodness that she and Xena is doing. Gabrielle's light is the quill, her courage is the scroll, and her love is the message. We can learn from their love; united as a team Xena and Gabrielle fought for the greater good. They have given so much; my heart is lifted thinking of them. I, too, will miss them, and I will never forget them."

There was a ruckus outside the tavern. Loud voices screamed and demanded immediate attention. Hercules went to the door and opened it quickly. A large man held a lasso on a golden palomino. A woman on its other side held a rope on the horse, which was lathered and very agitated. The people in the tavern flooded the street and Cyrene called out. "Hey! That's Argo!"

Hercules and Iolaus grabbed the man and slammed him against the tavern wall. Autolycus and Ephiny reached for the woman and held her arms as she struggled. Argo, now calm, walked over to Cyrene and nuzzled her hair. Cyrene rubbed Argo's soft muzzle and patted her neck. The horse whinnied.

"Argo. Oh Argo, I'm so glad to see you," Cyrene said hugging the blond animal.

"Who are you?" Hercules demanded. The man struggled and refused to answer. "I said who are you?"

"What's it to you?" The man said and tried to pull away from Iolaus.

"The horse you're stealing belongs to a friend of mine." Hercules said calmly.

"Xena's your friend?" The man sneered. "I know Argo is Xena's horse."

"What are you doing with her horse?" Iolaus asked and letting go of the man's arm.

"Who are you?" Autolycus asked.

"We're friends of Xena's too. I am Darnelle and this is Glaphera. I found Argo bloody and exhausted four days ago. I followed her here." Darnelle said.

"Where'd you first see Argo?" Hercules asked Darnelle, as he took a quick glance at Cyrene.

"We'd just filled our waterskins at Demeter's temple. I saw the horse and thought Xena was nearby. Glaphera checked the area around the acropolis but found nothing. I saw the horse rearing and pawing like she wanted us to notice her. We couldn't get close to her so we followed her here. I was hoping we'd find Xena and Gabrielle." Darnelle looked tired. He retrieved his waterskin and took a long

drink.

Hercules invited the two travelers into the tavern. The group went into the kitchen and Cyrene offered food to Darnelle and Glaphera.

"No thanks," Glaphera said. "I'm just tired after chasing the horse. What is going on here?"

"We are having a memorial for our friends. A man came and told us he was with Xena and Gabrielle when they were killed." Cyrene told the newcomers. She sat down and rubbed her eyes. "He said he was a trader that lived near the temple. What was his name again? Sawarre. Yes, that's it."

"So you took his word for it?" Darnelle asked with an angry tone.

"Sawarre said he was attacked by four brigands. He said he was about to be killed when Xena's chakram sliced through the sword aimed at his neck. He said that there were four of them at the scene. He said an archer shot an arrow at Xena but Gabrielle took it instead when she jumped in front of Xena," Hercules said, as the others around him nodded at Gabrielle's protective although futile act. "Sawarre said Xena stopped fighting to cradle a dying Gabrielle and the men took advantage and ran her through. He said he got away. After the men left the scene he went to Xena and she made him promise to get her weapons and Gabrielle's scrolls to me. He swore that they had crossed over. Sawarre said he thought the murderers had taken Argo. He claimed he had several injuries, and could not fulfill Xena's promise until a few days later. He said he buried them at his home." Hercules finished the story and still feeling the anguish he felt when he first heard of the deaths of his friends.

Darnelle shook his head and looked at Glaphera. He said to Hercules, "I don't believe it."

"Why not?" Cyrene asked feeling a small sense of hope.

"The horse. She kept going back to the temple. She only drinks and refuses to eat. She rests only when she can't take another step." Glaphera said. "She's searching for them, I know it. Did you search the temple?"

"No, Iolaus and I traveled to Sawarre's homestead. He showed us two fresh graves. I didn't see any reason to search for them." Hercules eyed Cyrene. He saw that she was beginning to believe that Xena might be alive.

"We should cancel the memorial until we know for sure. That would be for the best now." Cyrene said and then left the room.

"Hercules, I think we should go to Demeter's temple and search for them. I don't believe they're dead." Darnelle said looking at the son of Zeus.

Hercules sat back and contemplated what he heard. The rest of the group talked quietly. "If Argo is searching for Xena she must feel her presence around the temple."

"The horse went there no less than five times." Glaphera said to Darnelle, who nodded in agreement.

"Then we go to the temple," Hercules said as he walked out.

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The night air was cool as Hercules joined Cyrene sitting in the front of her tavern.

"Cyrene, don't get your hopes up just yet. It's not like Xena to drop out of sight, and I know she wouldn't just leave her weapons behind. The outcome could still be grim," Hercules smiled sadly and shook his head.

Cyrene cupped Hercules head in her hand. "I know, Hercules. After she came home, I told myself that I'd never give up on Xena again. Then after she died and came back, I realized that I could only accept her death if I saw herâ€¦ bodyâ€¦. I'd forgotten that and now I'm glad to be reminded."

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The trip to the stable began the journey to Demeter's temple. Herodotus, Hecuba, Lila, Cyrene, Autolycus, Glaphera, Darnelle, Hercules and Iolaus prepared to head out.

Hecuba spoke to the group in a quiet voice. "Gabrielle always liked an audience. She'd better have a great story to tell this time. Our girls are gonna have to have good reasons why they are causing such a fracas." She laughed and the group laughed with her.

Hercules drove the wagon with Herodotus beside him. Iolaus and Lila sat across from each other in the back of the wagon. Autolycus and Hecuba and Cyrene rode along side. Glaphera and Darnelle walked in front, leading Argo. In the distance, Joxer staggered and followed them.

A light rain began to fall. Hercules, lost in thought, was getting soaked. Hercules was puzzled, something happened to Xena and Gabrielle, and he knew he would not stop until the riddle was solved.

Xena defended and cared for him. Maybe this was another of Hera's cruelties. But no, Hercules knew Ares loved Xena. Hera wouldn't harm her dark spawn. Ares wouldn't allow his mom to kill Xena. Gabrielle maybe. Xena? No. Ares might have a role.

The temple offered no shelter from the rain. Hercules climbed off the wagon and started the search. The rest of the group spread out. Hercules walked past the furthestmost wall. A familiar aroma filtered to Hercules consciousness, and he stopped in his tracks. "Ares!"

Hercules travel mates abruptly turned to face him.

A flash of bright bluish light sparked and a loud whirring sound permeated the eardrums of the searchers. They grabbed their ears and writhed in pain. Hercules, whose face glowered bright red with anger,

stood firm. Ares appeared laughing at his little distraction. "You called, brother?"

"Why does this place reek of you?" Hercules asked with a scowl.

"Excuse me. REEKS!" Ares mocked. "You hurt me, bro."

"Where are Xena and Gabrielle?" Hercules demanded. "Their disappearance has you written all over it."

"Really, where?" Ares asked as he looked down at his body.

"You know where they are?" Hercules growled.

"I give up. Where?" Ares circled Hercules. After a complete circle, he turned and circled the opposite.

"Where are they, Ares? I smelled you the minute we entered the acropolis!"

"Now what makes you think I would know where Xena is? We're not chums you know." Ares sniffed his underarms. "I see what you mean about the smell though." Ares laughed again.

"Ares! Where in Tartarus are they! I won't ask you again!" Hercules grabbed Ares' neck, and threw him high into the cool rainy air and caught him before he hit the ground, leaving his feet dangling. Ares balled his fists and drove them into Hercules ears. Unflinching Hercules slammed Ares on his back on the ground. He stomped his boot on Ares windpipe and broke his neck. Ares aimed a fireball and hit his brother dead center in the chest. Hercules flew backwards and landed on his back sliding in the mud and grass. Ares jumped to his feet and straightened his horribly bent neck. He wrapped his hands around his head, yanked it and a loud pop sent the bones back in line.

"Um, Herc, I don't appreciate you breaking my neck." Ares laughed as he reached over and grabbed Iolaus by the throat and lifted him off the ground. "Shall I show your buddy here how it feels?"

"Ares!" Hercules boomed. Before Ares could move Hercules propelled himself into the midsection of his brother. The force sent Hercules and Ares tumbling in one direction, and Iolaus sliding in another. The force drove the men deep into the mud.

"All we need now is a marker!" Ares sneered. Hercules and Ares simultaneously jumped to their feet. Ares threw his fists at his brother's shoulders and hurled him across the courtyard. Ares back flipped and landed in a fighting crouch. He turned his head back and forth, but didn't take his eyes off Hercules. Ares flexed his muscles and went charging full force. Hercules came up swinging and charged fist first at Ares. But, before they made contact, Argo ran between the two men, which caused them to crash into her sides, buckling her ribs and sending them into her lungs and stomach. A loud oomph came from the horse and she collapsed to her knees. Hercules and Ares, who'd both fallen to the ground, look at Argo in horror. Cyrene ran to the horse as Argo's eyes glazed over and her nostrils flared. The horse fell onto her side. Cyrene's gaze went from the horse to Ares and she charged at him. When she reached him, she raised her foot to

stomp him. He grabbed her foot and pushed her backwards. Cyrene hit the ground hard. In a flash, Ares disappeared. Hercules watched Cyrene fall and yelled for Iolaus to help her. Iolaus got to her side as she stood and ran toward the horse. They all crowded around the stricken horse as Ares flashed and appeared at her side.

"Get away from her!" Cyrene screamed.

Ares rubbed Argo's nose and wiped away the blood that streamed from her mouth. He placed his hands on Argo's body and massaged her gently. He whispered, "She'll be fine. I guarantee it." Sparks emitted from Ares fingers. Argo took several labored breaths and went limp. Cyrene began to sob. She rubbed the horse's neck and held her head in her lap. Ares ran his hands from her head to her rump. After a few minutes the horse whickered and the people surrounding her stepped back to help the mare get to her feet. The horse quickly bit a plug out of Ares shoulder. He yelped in pain and Hercules laughed. His eyes darkened and he grabbed Ares again by the neck.

"Where are they!"

Ares pulled himself away from Hercules. "Um, didn't you say you weren't going to ask again?" Ares taunted. Cyrene went to his side and slapped him soundly.

"Do you know where my daughter is?" She asked angrily.

"Okay, okay. She went on a mission."

"A mission? For you?" Cyrene could not believe her ears.

"Yes, and well no. Wait, now that I think about it, yeah, for me." Ares said grinning.

Hercules looked at his brother, overwhelmed with anger. "What have you done Ares?"

"She's fine bro."

"Why the charade with Sawarre. Sawarre. Hold it. Sawarre spelled differently equals Ares war!" Hercules went after his brother again. Ares freezes him where he stood.

"I've had enough abuse from you people. They're on an errand. I just threw in the war part. You bought it, didn't you? Every tiny little bit. However, the blood is real. Xena did battle some brigands just outside the temple. Argo really is her horse." Ares threw his head back and guffawed. "I'm getting something out of this all right. An heir apparent."

"Xena would never give you a child. Why can't you leave them alone and get on with your pitiful existence," Cyrene said through clenched teeth.

Ares feigned hurt feelings. "I can see where Xena gets her boiling blood my dear." Ares raised Cyrene's hand and kisses it. If only I had found you when you were her age. You have the warrior spirit. Oh well, that's another tale. No, Xena wouldn't give me a kid." Ares laughed. Everyone looked unsmiling. "You people are so pathetic. You'll get them back." Ares sighed. "When I'm done with them. But

you'll have to wait a bit. It took time to make one what others want and expects one to be. They're almost ready. Besides, acceptance is the key to life, isn't it?" He sparkled away.

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They're alive Hercules!" Cyrene said happily.

"Cyrene, I think youâ€¦ we should be patient. Ares likes playing sick games."

Cyrene stood thoughtful and then she smiled. "I believe him."

"Me too." Lila echoed Cyrene. She looked at Hercules and smiles uneasily. "I do."

"I wish I could believe. Maybe they are alive. Maybe this time he isn't lying."

"Hercules!" Glaphera yelled. "You might want to see this."

Hercules ran to see the wall, where a swirling ethereal mass of blues, reds, greens and yellows appeared. Cyrene and the others joined them. The mass enlarged and suddenly spit out Xena and Gabrielle. They were unconscious and hit the ground slowly and easily.

"Xena!" Cyrene ran to her side. "Gabrielle!" Hecuba and Lila ran to her, Herodotus followed close behind. In the entrance of the temple Joxer wept. Instead of going to Gabrielle, he turned and headed to Amphipolis.

Hercules checked their pulses and for injuries. To his relief they seemed fine. Hercules helped the families load the precious cargo and gently drove the wagon to Amphipolis.

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The healer examined the women and found nothing wrong, except they were still unconscious. The healer sent them all from the room except Cyrene and Hecuba. The others made their way back to the tavern. Hercules went to the room Cyrene had prepared earlier. He lay back on the bed and awakened a while later to join the others in the bar.

"Xena and Gabrielle haven't stirred," Iolaus said as he sat down.

"There is something wrong, Iolaus. I don't know what it is. I just know in my gut that Ares is up to something. He doesn't just give up like that." Hercules shook his head.

Iolaus was concerned for his friend. "Did you get hurt or anything when you fought with Ares?"

"No." Hercules snapped. "There's something else up, Iolaus. Trust me."

"Okay, maybe you're still tired. You haven't slept much."

Hercules studied Iolaus' face and smiled. "I'm sorry. I just hate it when my _family_ interferes with innocent lives."

"I can understand that. Hey, are you hungry. I can get you some stew," Iolaus said watching Hercules eyes. He didn't like what he saw.

"No. You go ahead." Hercules walked out of the tavern and called out for his brother. "Ares!"

"What?" Ares answered without appearing.

"What's wrong with them?"

"Nothing. There is nothing wrong with them. They're very tired. They're resting." Ares laughs.

Hercules looked around for Ares and said, "I know you're up to something."

"Yadda yadda yadda."

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"They haven't moved." Cyrene said to Hercules.

He stooped beside Xena and looked her over. He did the same with Gabrielle. He looked at Cyrene and shook his head. "I don't know. I think Ares must have done something to them. I just don't know what."

"The healer said the longer they sleep the more we lose them. If they don't wake up soon. Iâ€¦I'm frightened." Hercules put his hand on Cyrene's shoulder and squeezed. She brought weary eyes to his and smiled weakly.

The days ran into each other. Hercules was in the tavern and he began to pace. He waved his strong arms in one direction and then suddenly the other. Iolaus sipped a cold cider and watched him. Hercules was talking to the air, his face animated. Iolaus heard Hercules stomach growling. "Herc, have you eaten today?"

Hercules looked at Iolaus. His eyes are red and angry. "Dammit Iolaus, Ares doesn't just give up, not with Xena. I know it. He has to be stopped." He left the tavern.

Cyrene and Hecuba sat with their daughter's holding their hands and washing their faces. Each seems to have developed a fever. They become frightened by loud voices. Hercules yanked the door open and stepped inside. Cyrene and Hecuba stood in front of their children.

"Hercules! What are you doing?" Cyrene screamed. He ignored them.

"You and Hecuba need to leave." He said. Iolaus rushed in behind him. Cyrene looked at him, begging him to do something.

"What're you doing Hercules?" Iolaus asked. Hercules either didn't, or chose not to hear him.

Cyrene and Hecuba grasped hands and stood up to Hercules. He looked back and forth at them. His hair is soaked and he's breathing heavily, almost like he's panting. Iolaus went around the big guy to look at Xena and Gabrielle's still sleeping bodies. Hercules moved closer to the women. Herodotus came up behind Hercules and motioned for Iolaus to join him.

Cyrene and Hecuba's hearts began to race. They were scared, thinking of what Hercules intended to do to their daughters.

He smiled an eerily smile and licked his dry lips. "Ladies, I am sorry. I must do this. It'll be easier for you if you leave."

Herodotus grabbed Hercules right arm and Iolaus grabbed his left. Hercules drew himself powerfully back. Flexing his thick shoulders he threw Iolaus and Herodotus off like children. He went for Xena and Gabrielle. He pulled out a dagger and stood over his friends. He shot a look at the people in the room and dared them to come closer.

"Hercules please! You're exhausted! You need to rest! Please buddy, don't do this!" Iolaus inched closer.

Hercules looked down and then he drew his massive arm above Xena's chest. "Forgive me if I'm wrong!" He plunged the dagger into her chest to the hilt. A second later he did the same to Gabrielle. Their mothers' screams etched into his psyche. He dropped the dagger and walked out of the building.

Hercules walked to the jail, he went inside and turned himself in. The jailer was confused. Iolaus walked in behind Hercules and watched his friend slump onto a cot. Hercules was asleep almost as fast as he sat down.

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A noise awakened the son of Zeus. Iolaus stood watching Hercules, leaning against the cell door. He'd been there the whole time.

"Why Herc?" Iolaus choked out his words.

"You wouldn't understand."

"WELL WHY DON'T YOU TRY ME!" Iolaus screamed. "I'm supposed to be someone you can trust. You KILLED Xena and Gabrielle! Gods Hercules!"

"Right," Hercules said so quietly Iolaus barely heard him.

"What?"

"It's Ares, Iolaus. He said acceptance is the key to life. Their life. If we accepted those two bodies we would never get Xena and Gabrielle back." Hercules explained sounding crazy.

Iolaus watched him and he had a hard time believing his friend. "You'll need more than that Herc. The people in this town want to hang you. I don't know how long I can hold them off."

"Then don't."

"Right. Here, kill my friend," Iolaus laughed bitterly.

"I don't want you to fight for me this time."

"Sure, that's easy enough! What's with you! I cannot let you be hanged like a common murderer! I will not!" Iolaus face was fiery red and his head began to throb.

"Iolaus I don't know how, but I know the bodies in the healer's yurt are not our friends. They're not. They're pacifiers. Ares gave them to us so we would leave him alone." Iolaus started to understand. "If I didn't stop them then Xena and Gabrielle are as good as dead. I think Ares has them. I think he'd keep them as long as those things were alive."

Laughter. Ares' laughter. He clapped his hands.

Outside the jail, a man incited the citizens of Amphipolis. "Hercules murdered two helpless women. Ares brought them back to us and Hercules was so jealous he murdered them. He killed them while their mothers begged him for their lives. We must not let this man live to kill again. We must stop him before Zeus intervenes. We must kill him NOW!" The crowd went wild. People brought axes and pitchforks. They were hungry for Hercules' blood.

Iolaus heard them coming. He went to the door as the jailor ran out of the building and joined the mob. Iolaus barely got the door shut. He clamped the window shutters closed. With such an angry mob, Iolaus knew it would do him no good to talk for Hercules. He was frantic; Hercules seemed unfazed.

A noise from the rear of the jail drew Iolaus. Joxer stood in the doorway, sword drawn and ready. Iolaus looked wildly at him and then at Hercules. Iolaus stepped up to Joxer and started to say something. Before he could speak Joxer said, "I have horses ready. If we leave now we might make it."

Iolaus grinned halfheartedly and looked to Hercules. He didn't move. Iolaus ran his hand through his hair and anger streaked across his brow. He ran into the cell and pulled Hercules to his feet. They made it through the back door. A firebomb landed on the window ledge and the fire spread quickly. People swarmed around the building. Hercules, Iolaus and Joxer finished mounting the horses as a band of drunken justice seekers rounded the corner. They took off.

"Hey! Hercules is escaping!" One of them yelled.

"Iolaus and Joxer are helping him!"

The crowd rushed to the rear of the building. The instigator smiled an evilly, "I knew he was guilty. The coward! We'll get him! Bet on it."

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The horses were lathered and panting. Iolaus and Hercules followed Joxer to a cave that neither had seen before. They dismounted and Joxer gathered the reins and led the horses to a nearby water hole. He quickly removed the tack and slapped each horse on the rump. They ran off down the streambed. He hid the gear in a natural hole and covered it with thick reeds.

Iolaus and Hercules went inside the cave. There wasn't any place for them to hide. Iolaus looked angrily at Hercules and then left the cave in a huff.

"What in Tartarus are you trying to do! You idiot! You let the horses go and there isn't even any shelter inside," Iolaus yelled at Joxer.

Joxer wearily shook his head and walked past Iolaus. Iolaus grabbed his arm and whirled him around. He drew back to hit him and Hercules caught his arm. Iolaus looked wild-eyed at Hercules and then stomped away. Joxer followed Iolaus.

"If you'll give me a minute I'll show you how to get inside the cave," Joxer talked to the back of Iolaus' head.

"I've been there! There is nothing in there!" Iolaus said not turning.

"There is plenty of shelter. Follow me," Joxer said as he passed Iolaus.

"I followed you onceâ€¦." Iolaus spat out. Hercules placed his hand on Iolaus's shoulder and pushed him in Joxer's direction. Iolaus yanked out of Hercules grasp and followed Joxer.

Inside the cave Joxer went to the wall and ran his hands along side an outcropping of jutting rocks. He found one in particular and pulled it slightly up. When fully extended, a large rock moved to reveal an opening in the otherwise small cave. Joxer waved Hercules and Iolaus through the hole. He followed and once on the other side he pushed a stone and the opening sealed. When it completely closed Joxer clapped some flint and ignited a torch. He picked it up and headed into a small passageway that opened into a large room. The three men entered the room and Joxer lit another torch. He climbed upon a rock and pushed another rock revealing sunlight. He climbed down went to a table and opened a bag that was already there. It held bread, dried meat, a waterskin and two wineskins. He opened one of the wineskins and took a long drink. He looked at Iolaus and nodded his head.

Iolaus dropped his head and then looked sheepishly at Joxer. "Iâ€¦ amâ€¦ ah. Joxer I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said what I said. Iâ€¦." Iolaus stops.

"Forget it," Joxer said taking another drink. He offered it to Hercules, who refused. Joxer then offered it to Iolaus, who also refused. "Xena showed me this hideaway. I've had to use it on a few occasions." Joxer sat heavily in one of the chairs beside the table. He pulled off his helmet and rubbed his head. He kept his head down, sobbing quietly. Hercules went to him and, without looking, Joxer

held his hand out to stop him. Joxer put his helmet back on and looked hard at Hercules.

With red, tear-filled eyes Joxer said, "I loved them. I don't know why you killed them. I just know that Xena and Gabrielle wouldn't want you to be murdered. I think you should have a fair trial. It's what Gabrielle would've wanted," Joxer cried as he talked. "Iâ€| don't knowâ€|she isâ€| was myâ€|. Who am I kidding? Gabrielle loved me, I know. But, not likeâ€|the wayâ€| Iâ€|loveâ€|her." Joxer stood, clenched his fists, and got in Hercules face. "Why! Why'd you kill them!" Joxer hit him in the mouth. Hercules did not move.

Iolaus tried to step between Hercules and Joxer but Hercules waved him off, and wiping at the blood he tasted. He started to talk to Joxer. "Joxer, I understand your grief." Joxer hit him again.

"No! I don't think you do!" Joxer said, his voice shrill. He went to strike again but Hercules blocked his fist. He grabbed Joxer's shoulders and held him.

"I do know how you feel! I lost my wife and children! I know how it hurts so bad you just want to die. But you can't, you have to go on. Anger will eat you up and spit you out like bitter fruit! I know what I did hurt you! I know that! But, I did what had to be done. Xena and Gabrielle will know that. It is hard describing a gut feeling, but those two bodies were NOT our friends. Ares is playing a sick game," Hercules put his hand on Joxer's shoulder. Joxer bit his lip and he slowly began to unclench his hands. He dropped his head and pulled away from Hercules. Joxer went to the chair, and sat down, He took another long drink from the wineskin. Hercules walked to the sunlight and looked up into the ray of light.

Iolaus stood, feeling numb, thinking, "What a mess. What a gods awful mess."

Hercules pulled two chairs around him. He motioned for Iolaus and Joxer to join him. "I'm going back to Amphipolis. In the morning. I'm going to let the people there judge me. I think the right choice will be made."

"Herc, do you think that is the right thing?"

"Yes, I do," Hercules began to tell them about what he has in mind.

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The night passed quietly. Lila and Hecuba got dressed. They both wore the dresses that they wore during the first eulogy. This time though, they wore black veils. The funeral was being held in the tavern. Lila sat on the bed in the room Cyrene had prepared for them. She was very tired and her skin very pale. She was not talking and tears streamed following the same path as the thousands she had already cried. She was shaking and holding a lamb; Xena had given it Gabrielle and Lila held it to her heart. Herodotus knocked on the door and told the occupants he was ready to go. Hecuba put her arm around Lila as they left the room.

Cyrene sighed wearily, she was thinking: "Well, I said seeing her body would make me accept her death. How I wish I'd never voiced that

thought." Her throat constricted and she had trouble speaking. The tavern was full of mourners again. Only this time it was for real.

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Iolaus, Joxer and Hercules walked into Amphipolis, they were spotted immediately. Someone raised the alarm and people ran outside. Ephiny, Autolykus, Darnelle, and Herodotus rushed to the scene.

Hercules climbed on the back of a wagon, determined. "If you want to kill me, here I am. I'm not running. This is Ares' doing. You're playing right into his hands. I killed two bodies, but they were NOT Xena and Gabrielle. Think about it! Ares loves causing pain and hardship. You all know he's taunted and tortured Xena for seasons. Wherever Xena and Gabrielle are, you can bet that Ares is responsible. If you think I'm a cold-blooded murderer then kill me but let Joxer and Iolaus go, they've done nothing but protect me. Let them go and you can kill me, I won't fight you."

The mob rushed forward and grabbed the three men.

"Burn 'em with Xena and Gabrielle. Tie 'em to the pyre." Someone yelled.

The people pushed the three men in front of the pyres that held the bodies of Xena and Gabrielle. Iolaus and Joxer were separated from Hercules. All three were tied and Hercules is led to the pyre and lashed to a wooden stake. Joxer and Iolaus do not fight. They let the mob have its way and no one said a word. Cyrene and Hecuba ran to the crowd and fought their way through. They saw the madness and tried to free Hercules. Both were pulled back and Darnelle stood next to Hercules holding a torch. Hercules made no move to free himself.

"So, you're just going to burn. No fighting back?" Darnelle asked Hercules.

"Yes," Hercules said. He looked at the crowd, and the mob started shuffling around, uncertain. It seemed to be losing its need for his blood.

Darnelle looked uncertainly at Hercules. He scanned the faces of the people and he saw compassion. On the faces of Xena and Gabrielle's mothers he saw forgiveness. He hesitated and then threw the torch on the ground. He looked back at Hercules and walked away in disgust. "I'm sorry, I don't know what I was thinking," Darnelle said and kept walking.

There was a slight mumble in the crowd. The crowd watched Hercules accept his fate, and it shook them up. A man came forward and picked up the torch. He began to speak: "Hercules murdered in cold blood two innocent and helpless women. You aren't just going to let him walk? He's a killer. Will you be able to stop him from killing you in your sleep?" The man pointed to Cyrene and then to Hecuba. "He killed your children! I say he dies!"

The crowd was silent. Someone yelled out that Hercules should have a trial. The man wrinkled his nose and turned to Hercules. "Well now, I agree. I'm the judge, jury and your executioner!" As he drew the

torch back to throw, a whoosh sounded. The flaming end of the torch fell to the ground.

"SheeeeeYa!"

All heads turned to see Xena and Gabrielle run toward them. Xena grabbed her chakram as it came back. Xena stopped and yanked the man backward. He turned to face her, she said, "Ares."

The man's shape changed into the God of War. Ares' just laughed. "I wondered when you'd get back."

"Just in time, it seems," Xena said as she watched Gabrielle free Hercules.

"Well. I'm done here," Ares said as he flashed away.

The crowd went wild and gathered around Xena and Gabrielle. Cyrene and Hecuba found their daughters and both sobbed as they held them to their breast. Xena hadn't realized the strength that her mother possessed until Cyrene nearly crushed her ribs. Looking over her shoulder Xena saw Gabrielle getting the same treatment. The two of them locked eyes and pleaded for the other to save her. It wasn't going to happen because there was a long line of people who wanted to get a hold on Xena or Gabrielle. The crowd couldn't wait to tell them how much they were loved.

Xena looked again for Gabrielle and saw her crushed frame in the arms of Joxer. Xena grinned in spite of herself. Gabrielle saw Xena peering at her and cast a frantic look that went something like: "GET OVER HERE AND FREE ME! NOW!" Xena realized her auntie Celeste, who loved to pinch and kiss Xena's rosy little cheeks, was coming her way and mirrored the same frantic look to Gabrielle.

They finally made it into the tavern. Joxer wobbled onto one of the table tops and shouted in his deepest warrior voice to the revelers: "Frien's and family, the godsh heard our pleeze. Sheena and Gabbyrelle are home and safe! Sheena, I cannot say how mush I mished you. How mush we mished you!" Joxer waved his hands at the people in the tavern and they gave a rousing round of applause and laughter. Gabbyrelle, what can I say? We mished you too!" Another round rose from the people. "Before I shush upâ€|" he was pelted with napkins and all kinds of grapes. "Okay! Anyway, I would like to ash for a requesht from ya both." Xena looked at Gabrielle and they both nod. "Willya quit it with the dyin' on us! You're killin' us! Dyin' alla time, quit it!" Xena and Gabrielle both nodded animatedly and said in unison: "We promise!" The room went wild again. "An one more thingâ€|." Joxer stood straight up, hesitated to left and right and fell backwards into the arms of Hercules and Iolaus.

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Later, after the crowd had retired for the night, and Joxer put to bed, the friends sat and discussed the events that had occurred.

"I knew when Ares told me that it took time to be what others expected, those bodies weren't yours," Hercules said to Xena and Gabrielle. Joxer, Iolaus, Ephiny, Autolycus and Darnelle sat at a table in the tavern. They were the only ones up.

"Hercules, you talk like its been weeks. Gabrielle and I were only fighting Mavigan for two days," Xena said. Gabrielle nodded with agreement.

"Xena, you guys have been gone for weeks. You had two funerals, and a wonderful eulogy," Ephiny said and smiled.

"Wow," Gabrielle said.

"Ares said acceptance was the key to life. I don't believe he knew how much he helped me decide on what I needed to do." Hercules smiled sadly.

"You were going to let them burn you to death?" Gabrielle asked with a frightened look.

"Yes. You see Gabrielle, most of the time, it's faceless mobs that murder innocent people. But this time it was different because I knew everyone in Amphipolis, and I know their hearts. They are honest and rational people. As long as I fought them, I gave them fuel to keep the bloodlust burning. But, when I gave up, the cycle of hatred was broken," Hercules looked at Iolaus and smiled with tired eyes.

"I thought he was crazy," Iolaus laughed. "Still do."

Hercules took a drink of wine. "The bodies of Xena and Gabrielle were readily accepted too. They had to be destroyed. Ares riddle was simple and stupid. He told me how to free you two, and he didn't know it."

Xena scratched her head. "Those bodies would have eventually died and by then Ares could have held us forever. We searched, but there was no way out. He showed us, through the portal, bits of what was happening. Ares said as long as we weren't missed, we were his prisoners. He held us tight, but then you figured it out. We saw you kill the beings Ares created. When you destroyed them, we were able to return. Thanks Hercules, you freed us from your idiot brother." Xena patted Hercules hand. She looked at the rest of the people sitting with her. "It took us a few days to make it back here. But, we made it, like I said, just in time."

"Thank the gods, its over. Um, never mind what I just said. What I meant to say was, thanks to Hercules, it's over," Gabrielle laughed.

"Xena?" Ephiny asked.

"Yes."

"Where do you think Mavigan is now?" Ephiny shot a look to Gabrielle and grinned.

"Hanging out somewhere," Xena deadpanned. "Maybe with Ares. They made a good match y'know. Ares and his error."

Gabrielle groaned and the people at the table laughed. Xena smirked, waved her arm and bowed. It was good to be home.

The end

End
file.